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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER MERABISHVILI'S VIEWS ON THE
CONFLICTS

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b)&(d).

Summary

1. (C) In a wide-ranging discussion of the separatist conflicts with the Ambassador May 9, Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili said Abkhaz de facto president Sergei Bagapsh has the mentality of a typical Soviet administrator, hopelessly afraid of making any decisions that entail risk or that might upset Moscow. While Merabishvili declined to say whether Georgia would consider any overtures to the Abkhaz -- saying such political decisions are the province of President Saakashvili -- it is clear from Merabishvili's analysis that he doubts such initiatives will have any effect. He said he does not know why the Abkhaz suddenly decided to release three Georgian students May 3, and expressed even more bewilderment over what the Russians had hoped to gain by the March 11 helicopter attack on the Kodori Gorge. On South Ossetia, Merabishvili said the pro-Georgian "alternative president" Dmitry Sanakoyev is steadily gaining popular support, and the Georgian government is working on a number of development projects in the Sanakoyev-controlled area. End Summary.

Back to the Brezhnev Era in Abkhazia

2. (C) Merabishvili told Ambassador and DCM that he does not expect Bagapsh to order a "provocation" to heighten tensions, adding that it is clear that Bagapsh and most if not all of his Abkhaz associates have no information on the Kodori attack. Merabishvili noted that Abkhaz "defense minister" Sultan Soslaneyev had resigned May 8, and said this underlines the dominant role of Anatoly Zaitsev, a Russian who serves as the Abkhaz military's "chief of staff." Merabishvili said Bagapsh is in full political control of Abkhazia -- dismissing rumors that de facto vice-president Khajimba may be able to constrain his actions -- but the problem is Bagapsh's personality. Merabishvili described Bagapsh as having the mindset of a typical Brezhnev-era administrator, as well as a history of Soviet-style corruption in the energy business that also gives the Russians leverage over him. Because of this, Merabishvili said, Bagapsh is unwilling to make unpopular decisions, to "break traditions," or to go against strong personalities like Zaitsev.

3. (C) Asked by Ambassador and DCM what he thought of offering economic carrots to the Abkhaz, Merabishvili said this might be a good idea in ten to fifteen years, but given the current situation in Abkhazia it would produce no response -- and in fact might be harmful if it undercut the growing sense among the Abkhaz that they are being left behind as Georgia advances economically. Merabishvili said that while Bagapsh puts on a better appearance in meetings with Western diplomats than his South Ossetian counterpart Kokoity, he is actually less willing to undertake actions on

his own initiative; in classic Soviet style, Bagapsh talks at length but says nothing, carefully weighing his comments for the hidden tape recorder in the room. Merabishvili said Bagapsh is in fact fairly disengaged from his work, drinking daily (the cause of his recent health problem) and leaving many issues to de facto prime minister Ankvab. Given all this, Merabishvili said, Bagapsh is unwilling to meet with Saakashvili or to negotiate seriously with the Georgians, and would only do so if the Russians ordered it.

14. (C) Merabishvili said he had not expected the Abkhaz to release the students arrested along the Enguri River in March when they did, even though the Georgians had been in contact with the Abkhaz through an intermediary from the Georgian region of Adjara. He said his ministry had informed the Abkhaz that it could not control the actions of people in the Gali district if the students were not released, but he had not expected this to produce a quick response. He speculated that Bagapsh may have sped up the release to get the issue out of the way before a visit from French diplomats.

Russians at Sea

15. (C) Merabishvili said it is clear the Russians do not know what to do in Abkhazia, or in their relations with Georgia generally. He said Viktor Komogorov, a deputy head of the Russian FSB, had admitted to one of Merabishvili's deputies that the economic blockade had not hurt Georgia as much as the Russians expected. Merabishvili said it was lucky that Georgia is experiencing such high economic growth, which blunts the blow of the Russian sanctions. He said Komogorov had said that Russia would never recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- "the current situation is the best for us -- we need all of Georgia" -- and he claimed

TBILISI 00001100 002 OF 002

to believe that Georgia would need only about six months of preparation to move from its Euroatlantic-oriented foreign policy to a Russian orientation. Merabishvili said it was clear that Komogorov, whom he called the source of most ideas about Russia's Georgia policy, did not understand the real situation in Georgia. Merabishvili added that the Kodori attack was the least comprehensible decision he had ever encountered in his life. He speculated that many Russian officials -- perhaps even Putin himself, he said with a laugh -- have no idea who in the Russian government had decided to launch the attack or why. He said the Russians are continuing their espionage activities in Georgia as before.

Progress in South Ossetia

16. (C) Turning to South Ossetia, Merabishvili said Sanakoyev's popularity in the region increases every day; people no longer talk about whether he is a Georgian agent, but instead about whether he is good or bad. He said Sanakoyev's team of ethnic Ossetians have excellent contacts in Tskhinvali, and through them the Georgians know about every important conversation in Tskhinvali soon after it happens -- something that has reduced the risk of "accidents" and "provocations." He said the Georgian government is buying land to build houses for Sanakoyev officials in Kurta -- driving the price of land there higher than in exclusive parts of Tbilisi -- and also plans to build a hotel and restaurant in Kurta and a disco in Tamarasheni. Merabishvili said that as Sanakoyev has come closer to becoming a legitimate official, his security situation has improved greatly; the Georgians now have no information about active plans to harm him, while six months ago five different groups were gathering information on how to kill him.

17. (C) Commenting on the recent discovery of a shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile in South Ossetia, Merabishvili said he understood that the de facto authorities have five such missiles left from a group of eight brought into the region two years ago. He said that to prevent defections, the Russians had recently increased salaries of police officers

and other officials in Tskhinvali, so that they now earn more than their counterparts in Georgian-controlled areas or in Vladikavkaz. Merabishvili encouraged the Embassy to consider holding concerts and other cultural events in Kurta or along the dividing line in Tamarasheni, so that people from the Georgian enclave could easily attend.

Comment

18. (C) Unfortunately, Merabishvili's pessimistic evaluation of Bagapsh may contain some truth. While we often hear rumors that Bagapsh has new ideas and is interested in talking with the West, every time we travel to Abkhazia to meet him he offers nothing of substance. Recently the Abkhaz have pulled out of two planned U.S.-sponsored study tours: a joint NATO tour with the Georgians (which a number of de facto officials were eager to join) and a humanitarian medical trip to Ukraine, organized by John Snow International, to learn techniques for care of newborns in hospitals. Even South Ossetian doctors were able to participate in the latter program. Both decisions suggest a regime fundamentally afraid to take chances.

19. (C) Clearly Merabishvili is a major player in Georgian policy toward both conflicts. He acknowledged that "pressing" the Abkhaz is a major part of Georgia's strategy, and we have no reason to doubt that President Saakashvili fully agrees. At the same time, however, Merabishvili was unwilling to totally rule out new overtures to the Abkhaz, even though the logic of his argument suggests they would be useless. For all Merabishvili's influence, his realm appears to stop here, with Saakashvili personally handling matters of diplomatic strategy.

TEFFT